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passage into horror



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SUMMER OF JAMIE

by Janadale Sylve-Wickersham

Jamie was not a warm child, honey, uh-uh. But she was never as cold as she got to be.

And she was *in-tuned*. Masks and phony words couldn't fool her. No-siree, there was no keepin' from Jamie what she was gonna *see*.

Of course, when she came down to the bayou to visit us for the summer, down from *N'awlins*, yall, she had her high-yeller-skinned nose raised clear to God's high heaven. 'Fraid to visit her "dawk" people, it seemed like.

But she wasn't like that after all, and it's jus' too bad I found out too late. But that's how it is when you're a child growin' up. You find everything out too late.

Marcel and Diedre and me're playin' jacks in the bedroom. Arguin' if my light-skinned cousin ir'ns her hair. I tell 'em it's none o' their business and Marcel starts sayin' "Well, 'scuse *me*, yall!" and makin' fun while Diedre laughs with her.

The door opens and Jamie walks in. With her birthstone "jool-ree" and her curly-trim socks. She flops down on the bed, sittin' wi'd her b'hind on her hands.

"Yall *talkin*' 'bout me?"

Marcel and Diedre look bug-eyed, but stubborn. Ain't gonna let no *joon-yah* tell 'em when to speak. They're ten, goin' on eleven. Jamie's seven. Me, I'm kin'a in b'tween. Just turned ten.

"Yall was *talkin*' 'bout me, *huh*?" Jamie leans her head so her ponytail hangs on one shoulder. Her eyes, real deep green, lock a stare onto Marcel and Deidre.

"Ah *know* yall was."

"Wadn't nothin' bad," Dee-Dee mumbles, sittin' cross-legged and starin' at her hands.

Marcel's stubborn, just sits there with her *mad* look.

Jamie smiles. Pops the bubble gum she's chewin'.

"Tha's okay, don't really mattah." She kicks the bottom of the bedframe and jumps off the bed. "Because *you* are goin' *away* and *nev'uh* comin' *back*."

Dee-Dee jumps, we all do. Before we know what's goin' on, Jamie points her finger in Marcel's face. "And *guess* what's gonna happen to *you*?"

Marcel like to die. She's shocked outta her skin, I can tell. Before she can answer back, before *any* of us can answer back, Jamie takes the gum out her mouth and *spits*. Quick as a prayin' mantis, faster than a snake. Just...*spits*.

In Marcel's left eye.

Marcel's mouth is hangin' open, her spat-in eye squeezed shut, her whole face pinched up and lookin' disgusted. Man, but she is disgusted!

"Come on, Cherise," Jamie says to me, "let's go play."

I get up, forgettin' all about playin' jacks. I follow Jamie. I'm a lil' scared not to. Turns out, Dee-Dee's got some kinda' blood disease. She had it all along but her momma and daddy didn't wanna say nothin'. Word gets out though, 'cause Dee-Dee's so sick, they have to take her to some hospital across the river. All the kids know what Jamie said, 'bout Dee-Dee goin' away and nevu comin' back. They don't wanna play with her.

They don't wanna play with me either after the *gris-gris* on Marcel takes. Marcel's lil' brother made it take, while he was playin' wi'd his daddy's fishin' pole. The hook caught Marcel in the eye, tearin' like a harpoon rippin' a grape. I can't even *think* about a hook goin' ina soft jelly eyeball. The eye closed up like it was mad to be blind, all gashed and crooked and bloody-streaked. Like it was gonna fall out any minute. Marcel's momma and daddy never did fix it right. They couldn't afford no operation.

Late in the summer, when Jamie's been stayin' with us a while, she starts wakin' up in the middle o' the night, sweatin' and screamin'. She's havin' bad dreams, she tells me, 'cause o' all the wicket things goin' on. Over and over she says it's not her that makes 'em happen. She just *knows* about 'em 'cause she's *in-tuned*. It's not her fault. Maybe she's sorry for what happened to Marcel and Dee-Dee, I don't know.

One time she tells me it's her turn next.

What? I ask her.

Somethin' bad's gonna happen to her next, she says.

Whyn't you go home then, I ask her, but she shakes her head and her face looks real sad. Like she can't make me understand.

"Ah toldya," she says, "Ah can't stop nothin' from happenin', Ah jus' know 'bout it 'cause Ah'm *in-tuned*."

Mama wanted Jamie to see some more of our people, a great aunt we had over on "P'cawn Ahlan'." I hate to say it, but I think Mama was showin' Jamie off a li'l bit. Jamie musta known it, too, but if she did, she didn't say nothin'.

Night 'fore we leave for Pecan Island, Jamie wakes up *screamin'* bloody murder. I go get Mama this time, 'cause I don't know what to do wi'd Jamie. She's jerkin' and stiff, and her eyeballs keep rollin' up.

Mama comes in her pink duster. I can see she's a lil' bothered, like her sister's pretty child is *some trouble* in the middle o' the night. But when she sees Jamie, her face blanches.

"Go get a spoon quick!" she says. "Hurry up! She's havin' a fit!"

I go rushin' off for the spoon, wonderin' what's a spoon gon' do for a fit, but I just go get it.

I come back and Jamie's floppin' all over the bed where we both sleep together, and Mama's prayin', Dear Lord *Jesus*, help this child, and tryin' to sit on top o' Jamie to hold her down.

I give Mama the spoon quick. I can tell now what she's doin', I remember my Aunt Connie fallin' in convulsions and scarin' us to death she might swallow her tongue.

Mama keeps Jamie pinned down, gets the spoon in her mouth. Jamie's hands and feet stop jerkin'. I move up close, I see her eyes. Wide open but rolled up in her forehead. Way back, hardly nothin' but the whites showin'. My stomach goes sick, like I'm gonna throw up bad.

Later on, after she's calmed down and her eyes go back to normal, Jamie's all quiet and shivery, and won't say nothin'. Mama makes her drink a whole glassa water and then goes back to bed. I sit down right next to Jamie and put my arm around her. Her cotton nightgown is soakin' wet, her blond ponytail with the "good-hair" curls all damp underneath.

Soon's my arm goes around her, she starts cryin', sobbin' and snotty and buryin' her head against her folded up knees.

"What's th' mattah?"

Her shoulders shake. Her voice is muffled. "Ah saw somebody kil't," she says, "and Ah wasn't supposed to."

I try not to stiffen up. What's she sayin'?

Big shiny streaks're on her face.

"It wasn't a dream, Cherise!" she says. "Ah *saw* it!"

She all-of-a-sudden squints like she's tryin' t' make out somethin' I can't see. I get a chill down my back.

"We're goin' to a place...with a back room—"

Jamie grabs my hand.

"You know what folks keep in their back rooms, Cherise, don'cha? Well you'll find out!"

"Now, Jamie, wait." I take my hand away. I say, real slow, "Tell me when you saw somebody killed."

I want her to say she was dreamin', I want her to say she saw no such thing.

Instead, she's quiet like I ask her to be. She pulls her nightgown down over her knees. Till the hem touches her toes.

"*Before*," she says. "Ah saw somebody get strangled to death before Ah was *me, Jamie*."

"You mean before you were *born*?" I wish I was too old to believe her. "You can't see nothin' before you're born," I snap. I'm gettin aggravated, but deep down a scary feelin's clawin' in my gut.

Jamie stares like she's drillin' holes through my head.

"You know what I mean!" she says. I stare. She said it, but...her lips didn't move.

"You know what I mean, Cherise."

Thank God she says it this time. My chest feels icy, like a frozen fist is squeezin' from inside.

I know what she means, all right. She saw somebody get killed *before*. Even though Mama says we're born with just one soul and the Bible says we only live one time.

"The Bible's got lies in it!"

I almost fall off the bed. How can she know what I'm thinkin'? You believe me now? is what she's really tryin' t' say.

She says she saw it happen in a field with a lotta high grass. She saw a man strangle a lady. When he was through, the man let go the lady's neck and the lady fell back in the grass. He hid her in the grass. A breeze started blowin'. Jamie took a step back, to hide.

But the man heard. Over the blowin' grass, Jamie saw him and he saw her. He stood up, growin' like a tower. Jamie says his eyes were flat, and cold-blooded, like a snake's. He showed his teeth, his face twistin' up mean and murderin'. Jamie turned to run, but she tripped, and the ground started shakin'—.

That's all she remembers. She says she musta got away 'cause it feels like he's still after her. But his power's gettin' stronger, she says, so strong, he's gonna be able to reach over to *now*.

I tell her that man can't be real, 'cause he's in a dream. So even if he killed somebody before, he can't kill nobody now.

"He won't kill me, Cherise," she says.

"He's gonna do *worse* to me than kill me. *Worse*."

I take a long time fallin' asleep.

Next mornin', it's so hot, tar's meltin' on the plankwalks. My clothes plaster to me soon's I get 'em on. And my stomach feels like its got a brick in it. Jamie's got gray half-moons under her eyes, won't talk to nobody, not even me. Mama's worried if she should send Jamie home.

From the canal front, me, Mama and Jamie catch a ride with Jack Pichard to Mama's cousin Daisy's house. Me and Jamie have to ride in the back o' Jack's ol' pickup and my b'hind's hurtin' from bouncin' all over the place. Dust from the shell road is burnin' my eyes, too, but Jamie's just sittin' there like she's plumb made o' stone, like she's not feelin' a thing.

At Daisy's house, I tell Jamie she should tell my ma *now* she don't wanna go. It won't do no good, she says. We're sittin' in Daisy's air-condition-caw,

waitin' with the motor runnin' while Mama and Daisy close up Daisy's trailer. Jamie's got a piece o' tawlet paper stuck in her nose, and the blood leakin' down on her lip is makin' me nervous. The half-moons under her eyes're gettin' deeper and darker too, but after hearing Daisy's big to-do about how "light-complected" Jamie is, I think Mama's forgot all about sendin' Jamie home.

The heat must be a hundred degrees outside by the time we pull up in front o' Big Momma's yard. The house's got a shaded porch and cee-ment steps. In the back there's a big magnolia tree with the flowers open and droopin' in the heat; some of the yellah'ed petals 're on the ground. Chickens 're peckin' away inside a wire fence, and a few ducks 're runnin' around loose, ruinin' the grass.

As soon as Daisy turns off the car-motor, the screen door opens and this big ol' woman with huge hangin' arms comes out on the porch. She's wearin' eyeglasses and there's a big ol' apron tied around her and a dishtowel on her shoulder. She waves to us. From where I'm sittin' in the car, I can see Hershey-brown moles all over her face.

We open Daisy's car doors and the heat hits us. Like steam from a boilin' kettle. Jamie drops to the grass.

They bring her to by passin' a wet towel on her face. Soon's she comes to, Mama says she needs a nap. You can't argue with Mama when it comes to takin' naps. They put Jamie in a bedroom that I think is kin'a warm, but it's nice 'cause it's got a' ol'-time sewing machine in it, the kind with the big black grate on the bottom that you have to rock up and down with your foot to get the sewin' machine needle pumpin'.

I go back out on the porch. The heat's so bad I can smell my own *merce*. The chicken coop and the magnolia flowers make a stink too, like the dead smell from wild animal glands. I hear Mama and Big Momma and Daisy talkin' inside; hot as it is, they're drinkin' coffee in the kitchen. I go on over to the back yard. Somethin's eatin' me.

I sit on the board hangin' from the ropes in the magnolia tree. I don't swing though, just drag my feet on the sandy spot under the swing. Flies and mosquita hogs're flittin' aroun'. It's quiet, shady under the tree, but somethin's wrong. The air's too heavy in the heat.

I brush a coupl'a red ants off my ankle. Is Jamie dreamin' right now?

I ask myself why I have to go and think that.

I hear somethin'. Stop the swing. Listen.

It's Big Momma with Mama and Daisy in the kitchen. I hear Big Momma sayin',

"Well, yeh, Ah know how it is. Me, Ah gotta do for my niece, my dead sistah's dawduh. Aw, n-o-o-o, honey, she can't do for herself! She's

cripple—and retawded, ta top it off! Been in d'at baid twenty-seven years. Can' talk, can' feed herself...Honey, the day *she's* gon' stan' on her feet, d'at's gon' be a *miracle!*"

But how can I hear 'em this far? The still air must be carryin', or else they're talkin' loud. But I listen harder, and Big Momma's voice gets louder, like somebody's turnin' it up 'cause they *want* me to hear. I stand up from the swing, the ropes rockin' a little, the wood seat bumpin' me in the butt. I'm rememberin' somethin'—.

"Well, yeh, d'at's why Ah keep her back there where it's more cool. Yeh, in the back r'u'm, where Ah jus' moved your own lil' niece..."

Somethin' Jamie said: We're gonin' to a place with a back room.

You know what folks keep in their back rooms, Cherise, don'cha?

And what had Big Momma just said:

In the back r'u'm, where we jus' moved your lil' niece.

They don't hear me squeak the screen door. Big Momma goes right on talkin'. I wish they would hear me. But I guess they're not gonna.

It's waitin' for me at the end o' the hall, behind the last door. The back room, where Jamie is. (You know what folks keep in their back rooms, Cherise, don'cha? Well, you'll find out!)

I'll find out, all right. I already know. Folks keep their nasty secrets in their back rooms that they don't want nobody else to see. Like Big Momma's niece.

I swallow, take the first step. The hall looks like it's gettin' higher on either side. Like I'm shrinkin' and steppin' in a tunnel. It's gettin' narrower and narrower, like the tunnel wants to squeeze me into a shadow.

I remember what I told Jamie about her dream. (That man can't be real, 'cause he's in a dream.) And Big Momma's words about her niece keep repeatin'.

(Can't talk, can't feed herself, been in that bed twenty-seven years.)

I don't know why I'm connectin' Jamie's bad dream with Big Momma's niece, but it's almost like Jamie's tryin' to make me read her mind. Like last night when I read hers and she read mine, when I knew what she was sayin' without her sayin' it and she knew what I was thinkin' about the Bible.

I'm at the door and reach out for the knob. It turns by itself. Hair raises up on my back. I don't wanna go in, but the door's openin'. I close my eyes.

A nasty-sour smell makes me gag—it's like somebody's breath after they vomit. I step inside the room. It's dim. None o' the shadows look right. They're all stretched longer than they should be.

I see two beds side by side against the wall, but one of 'em's empty. Jamie's supposed to be in that bed, I think, my heart poundin'. But she's not and—.

I'm afraid to look at the other bed. Maybe it's because I'm so scared that at first I don't see. In the dim light, all I can make out is a twisted hump growin' right outta the bed.

I step closer and I can tell by the shape of the spine, curved all crooked, the one shoulder humped bigger than th' other, that this is Big Momma's niece, the one Big Momma said can't move. She's nekked, shriveled up all uneven from the butt down, and...she's hunched on top o' somethin'.

I take a step nearer, close enough to see the hair like a wild nest o' cobwebs, and to whiff the stink fumin' off her.

It hits me then, she's crouchin'; Big Momma said she can't move, but she's *crouchin'*. I hear Jamie's words, like a warnin', but too late: His power's gettin' stronger, so strong he's gonna be able to reach over to *now*.

I start forward, all of a sudden understandin' what Jamie's been tryin' to tell me all along. But the thing in the bed turns her head and I stop dead in my tracks.

Her face is bloated, drool hangin' in slimy ropes down her chin, and when she opens her mouth, a black mouldy tongue licks out from between big pointy bucked teeth. Around her mouth and chin, dark smears hide her lips. When I see those smears are blood, a noise squeaks out my throat.

She all of a sudden *hisses*, raises crippled front claws at me. I freeze; the eyes pin me. Black, hidden in her swollen face, I can't see 'em but I feel their stare burrin' through me like cold tiny pins. They don't blink.

I don't dare move, just stand like I'm made o'wood, my throat dryer'n dust. Sweat trickles down in my eye and that's when I happen to look down.

It's all over the bed, stainin' the sheets deep red, soakin' the pillahs; 'specially the pillahs where a bloody, scooped-out mess lies oozing, little bitty pieces from it torn loose and stickin' to the sheets.

Still attached to the mess is a wetted-red mop with some blonde in it. A ponytail.

I start screamin'. My whole body screams.

And Big Momma's niece, Big Momma's *monster*, dives into Jamie. Through my flood tears, I watch it bury its face in Jamie's pool. My body's shakin' like I got the palsy.

It grunts, it pulls. Pieces o' Jamie tear off like slaughter-meat.

I hear Mama then, yellin' and poundin' the door. Big Momma and Daisy shoutin'.

All I have to do is let 'em in, let the grownups in and the monster won't be real. I hurry, I fight with the door lock—I *know* I didn't lock it when I came in—the monster grunts faster—.

I let 'em in fin'ly, fallin' on my tailbone when the door all of a sudden flies open. They rush to me and I point to the bed where I saw Jamie get eaten.



I try to tell 'em, but I can't talk right.

"Cherise! What's wrong, what's *wrong*?" Mama's cryin', lookin' at me scared, like there's somethin' wrong with *me*.

Again, I point to the bed and try to tell 'em.

Just then Jamie comes walkin' over rubbin' her eyes like I woke her up from sleepin'. I feel my eyes buggin' out, feel like I'm spinnin' and my head's swellin' from a sick fever. I rush over to the beds against the wall. I look for blood, a monster, but that's not what I see.

One bed's empty, sheets a little rumped, but clean. In the other lies this retarded cripple, paralyzed, droolin', nothin' but her claw fingers movin' real slow. Her empty-lookin' eyes stare right past me like she can't tell me from a glass windah.

I start backin' up from her bed. I can feel Mama behind me, cryin' an' draggin' on my arm. I try to tell her, I *have* to tell her about what I saw, but when I try to talk, blubberin's all that comes outta my mouth. I can't tell her 'cause the words disappear out my head like I never learned 'em.

Back in my own house, nighttime comes. Not just my tongue's tied. I'm numb all over. Mama won't hear o' lettin' me sleep by m'self. So I'm lyin' in bed. With my Bible under my pillah. Listenin' for when Jamie comes to bed, and tryin' to swallah this big hole in my throat every time I think about my cousin lyin' under the covers next to me.

It's dark, but this way, I don't have to see her eyes...I hear the door open, close my eyes quick and pretend I'm sleepin'. I hear her get in bed, hear the covers movin' on her side—.

"BOO!"

She's there! Right in my face! My heart's suffocatin'!

"Just playin' wi'cha." She smiles.

"Guess it's the day for a miracle, huh?" She gets in the bed. I keep my back turned to her.

"Don't make me mad, Cherise." She says real soft, "You bettah talk to me."

"You leave me alone!" I throw off the covers and getoutta the bed. I'm surprised I can be so mad when I'm so scared. I huddle in the dark, on the cold floor.

"Don'cha wanna know what happened?" She's lyin' on her side, watchin' me.

"I *already* know!"

"Don'cha wanna hea' me say thankya? You were right, y'know. I mean about openin' the door to let the grownups in. People who don't believe always make my power weak, and grownups don't believe more than anybody.

You almos' opened that door too fas'."

I remember Big Momma's niece, her eyes starin' right through me, Mama pullin' me away; and, as she pulls me, Jamie's voice inside my head comin' from that twisted zombie in the bed:

Cherise, he's done worse to me than kill me! *Worse!*

But her lips don't move. I feel like I'm in one o' Jamie's bad dreams.

I see then, all over again, the Jamie thing standin' beside me, lookin' down at Big Momma's niece while Mama pulls me away. Whisperin' to me in a man's voice so nobody but me can hear.

"I used to be like that. It was God punishin' me for somethin' I did real bad *before*."

And then in Jamie's real voice,

"Before I was me—Jamie".

Now, in the dark, the snake eyes find me. Flat, cold-blooded. I hear a hiss.

"It feels so good," she says, "to be *whole!*"



NO ARTIFICIAL ADDITIVES

by T.A. Freeman

I had him by the throat in a dark, dirty back alley off of Sixth Street in the downtown district. I had been looking for this one for the past three nights and each time I got close he skittered away, leaving a trail a bloodhound couldn't follow. But not this time. He knew someone was after him so he had set a trap for me, thinking I was just another player. He could never have guessed my reasons for tracking him down.

His goons were no match. The big one with the knife was lying motionless in a heap of yesterday's trash, his pearl-handled switchblade buried to the hilt in his left eye socket. The other sat upright against a wall, his spine broken in several places.

"Who's the man, Jackie?" I asked, smiling.

"Okay, you're not a cop, so who the hell are you!" he blubbered, trying to squirm away.

Someone you really don't want to piss off, Jackie." I tightened my grip on his scrawny neck and felt the carotid arteries pumping crazily.

"Look man, I don't know who you're after. You're a hitter, right? Just let me go, man, maybe I can help you find the guy, okay?"

"Not good enough, Jackie. You see, I know who you are. People on the street say you're the dealer in this district. But I also know the snow you shovel falls from higher up. You're just a little fish in a big marketplace. I want the name of the man you sell for, Jackie, the snow man." I squeezed a little more.

His eyes were starting to bug out of his head. I loosened my grip so he could talk. "Okay, okay!" he gasped. "The man is Malavasi, Frank Malavasi, and he's gonna kill you for askin' and me for tellin'."

"And who's the one that yanks Malavasi's chain?"

"I don't know, man!"

"I'm starting to get irritated, Jackie. Look at your friend there, he knows what happens when I get irritated." I swiveled his head around so he could get a good look at the goon with the switchblade in his eye.

"You're fuckin' crazy, you asshole!" he squealed. "You're gonna pay big time!"

"I'm tired of talking," I whispered in his ear. "What if I was to tell you that I'm going to feed you your own liver, Jackie?"

I don't think he believed I could do it because of the look of mute astonishment in his eyes when I did.

Different people have different incentives to justify their actions. Mine was contempt coupled with vengeance. It had simply gotten out of hand. The

government was slow to act, the police had to follow procedure, and the courts were kicking the pushers back out on the streets as fast as they could catch them.

Over the years I had watched with idle fascination as therace of men had blown each other to bits in war, poisoned the environment, and wreaked havoc in every corner of the globe. At one time I could take amusement in their simplistic acts of savage butchery. But the world had changed so much from my time to now. I did not care if people chose to kill themselves or each other, but the drugs they pumped into their veins were a scourge to me. And those who supplied the demand were enemies to my existence. It was not just self-righteousness; you see, cocaine had been the cause of my wife's destruction. I was now alone, and my grief for her had turned into sour vengeance.

So, I sought them out. The dealers, the pushers, the contaminators. In every nook and crevice of every city and country. It was not difficult to find the suppliers. They, like me, lived safe and away from the carnage they fed on. But unlike me, they soiled not their hands.

Instead, they sold their poison to dealers, who in turn would sell to smaller dealers, who in turn sold to those who would sell their souls for more poison, leaving a trail of lethal white powder and corpses. This sickening chain, I vowed, must be broken.

I had waited two nights after the confrontation with Jackie and his bodyguards before paying a visit to Malavasi, spending that time surveying his private estate and planning my next move. As always, there would be no trouble for me in gaining access.

Malavasi had planned well in securing his home from unwanted visitors. There was an electrified fence, several men with automatic weapons, and an electronic surveillance system, all of which would protect Malavasi from his own kind, but he could not have anticipated my unique talents.

When I arrived I peered through the french doors of the balcony. He was standing in his bathrobe behind a solid oak bar, pouring himself a drink with one hand while fondling a scantily-clad young blonde with the other. I saw through the windows that his protruding stomach and partially balding scalp were deceptive. He was a man who had grown fat from luxury but hardened from experience.

The scar running partway down his right cheek told me that he had once fought hard to attain the position and wealth he now held. I wasn't going to take any chances. I pulled the big .45 caliber automatic from beneath my cloak and walked inside.

He looked up at me, startled. "Hey, what the—who the hell are you and how did you get in?"

I pointed the gun at him and the girl started to freak out.

"My name's Canfield and I let myself in. Tell the blonde to leave us," I said. "We have business to discuss."

"Go," he ordered the girl. "And tell Danny we have a visitor."

She didn't hesitate to get out.

"You won't get any help from Danny or any of the others," I told him. "They're occupied."

His mouth hung open. "Doing what?"

"Making their way into the next world."

A smile crossed his face. "You got balls, kid," he sneered, "coming in here like this. I can appreciate that. So what is it, heh? Money? Drugs? You gonna rob me? Or did one of my competitors decide to punch my ticket?"

"None of the above," I said. "I just came by for a midnight snack."

"You're funny, kid, real funny. Let me tell you somethin'. I've eaten punks like you for breakfast. I know your type, lookin' to make a score on the old man. Plenty have tried, but no one's made it yet. But who knows, maybe you'll get lucky. So what's it gonna be, heh?"

"I want your address book, Mr. Malavasi."

"My what?"

"The book I know you keep with the names and addresses of contacts in the drug cartel. Where is it?"

"You've got a dangerous taste for trouble, Canfield."

I smiled. "I have a variety of tastes. One of which is collecting address books. It'll go nicely with the others I've managed to acquire from some of your competitors. Maybe you know some of them. Does Conklin, James, Frederico or Maselli ring any bells?"

A shadow passed over his face and he began to pale. "Yes, they were competitors of mine, but they're all dead. Everyone thought it was some kind of territorial war." His voice lowered to almost a whisper. "They never did find all of Conklin."

"No, no war, just a cleansing. Now where's the book?"

"In my safe, here." He backed to the wall behind the bar and swung a painting aside to reveal the door of the safe. He began working at the combination with shaking hands.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked.

"Let me ask you something, Malavasi. Would you allow the meat you eat every day to be contaminated with poisonous compounds? I'm not talking about simple artificial additives they cram into your food now, but potentially deadly chemicals which could kill you in a few minutes?"

"No, but what the hell has that got to do with the cartel?" He pulled the door of the safe open.

"My wife died of an overdose, or at least the effects of one. You see,

she had expensive tastes. Only the best. She liked the subtle flavoring of caviar and fine wines freshly assimilated into the blood of those who could afford the best. They were also safer. They led cleaner lives, took care of themselves, just like corn-fed beef to you."

A look of disbelief came to Malavasi.

I continued.

"On the night of her death, she fed on the rich red blood of a sleeping socialite. Only she did not realize the woman was half dead already from an overdose. You call it 'freebasing.' She became disoriented, losing control of the delicate balance between mind and body. She fell from the thirty-third floor of the woman's penthouse apartment, unable to fully make the change and take to the air.

"I saw it all through her mind's eye, felt the pain, the confusion, her screams, but could not help. There was no body, of course, only dust which was swept away by the traffic of the following day.

"We only took what we needed, having plenty of stock to rotate, there was no need to kill. But now the contaminants of your trade have spread to countless millions, and our supply of untainted blood is growing thin. I and a few others like me are changing that, though. The book, please."

He tossed the leather-bound address book on the bar and grinned. "You don't expect me to believe a cock-and-bull story like that, do you? You and a bunch of vampires on a mission to wipe out all the drug dealers in the world? Besides, if you're what you say you are, what the hell are you doing with that gun, boy?"

"Guns are something you understand, Malavasi. Actually, I deplore firearms." I pointed the gun at his head and pulled the trigger. He winced, but the gun only clicked; it was empty. I let it drop to the floor.

"You're a stupid shit, kid!" Malavasi reached into the safe and quickly drew out a gun of his own. "Too bad you're not going to be around to get some badly needed psychiatric care."

He wasted no time in putting two rounds into my chest. I felt the bullets pass through my body and heard glass shatter as they continued on their course through the windows of the french doors. I stood watching him as he looked stupidly at the gun and then at me. He fired again.

I came at him while he whimpered like a whipped dog. By the time I reached him, he had already lost his bladder. I smiled, unsheathing fangs which hungered for warm flesh.

"One of the things I've noticed, Malavasi," I whispered into his ear, "is that big-time dealers like you rarely use the drugs they sell."

That, and the ripping of his own flesh, were the last things he ever heard.



THE WISH by Watson C. Smith

There was a time when I would not dare to use magic. However, when my beloved Lisa died, I went on a quest to find a spell or device to bring her back to life.

I searched Egypt, Tibet, India—all the places of great magic, but to no avail. Then in Arabia, I found it. It was a lead bottle with three intertwining circles engraved on the side, a genie bottle. Taking it home with me, I placed it in a pentagram with a burning candle on each of its five points. Then I removed the protective cap.

From the bottle gushed a cloud of dark black smoke. When it cleared, there stood before me a seven-foot genie with sickly red-blue skin and three purple eyes, the third eye directly above its nose. It bowed to me and said,

“What is your wish?”

Showing her picture, I answered,

“If you will let me see my love, Lisa, alive before me, I will set you free.”

“I promise to do so,” it said, grinning like a maniac, “but only if you set me free first.”

So, using a sponge, I erased part of the pentagram, freeing the genie from its bonds.

“Now,” I said, “grant me my wish.”

It stepped outside the pentagram. Then with a laugh, it pointed at me and muttered some words that sounded like corrupt Coptic. Everything went black.

When I came to, the first thing I did was look for Lisa, but I didn’t see her. In anger, I looked around for the genie, but it was gone. Then, I noticed a full-length mirror that hadn’t been there before.

I looked in the mirror, and saw Lisa looking back, wearing my clothes. The genie had changed me into my girlfriend. For the rest of my life, I would be her.

Just my luck. Of all of Solomon’s magical servants, I had to pick a smartass.



DEATH

In defiance of volume gravity
Dwelling becomes a cavity
Separated for eternity
From everything that's left of me—
The remains of my totality
Striding towards reality
Always closer, always farther.

by David Munson

THE FIELD-TENDER

by Pierre LaBossière

The directions my grandmother had given me were about to get me lost out in the middle of nowhere on some nameless backwoods trail.

I was supposed to hang a left onto an unmarked road a couple of miles before a town called Paradise Hill. After the first turn-off, I'm supposed to turn left onto another unmarked road, go a couple of miles, and then make a right at a water tower onto a little cow path. I remember the water tower and the cow path from when I used to visit my grandparents' farm as a kid—at least my butt remembers all the potholes in the cow path.

I know it's nuts going out to that old farmhouse. It's not my responsibility to take care of this. But a part of me keeps telling myself that I have to. Lately, there seems to be a lot of things I have to prove to myself.

It's about a three-hour drive from my flat in Saskatoon to my grandparents' farm. The monotony of the countryside can make it seem like a longer drive, but I think it's beautiful country. In spots, where the wheat grows high and close to the road, a ribbon of black tearing across the golden landscape like a huge scar, it feels as if you're driving through a sun-kissed tunnel. I like that feeling. It's a lonely feeling.

What I remember most fondly of my summers on the farm were the stories that my grandmother used to tell us—about the Indians, about Cree spirits and Manitous, and evil spectres that haunted the endless north woods. Sitting in her big, overstuffed chair after grandpa went to bed, she'd pull out a bottle of her favorite wine, get herself pleasantly drunk, and as she balanced the half-empty bottle of wine on her knee, she would tell us her stories.

I passed the road my grandmother told me to watch for. Cursing, I made a U-turn and turned onto it. It was a gravel road, poorly graded, so I had to take it slowly. To my right, off in the distance, I could see the red grain elevators of Paradise Hill towering over the prairie. Up ahead, toward Alberta, I noticed a sullen, black thunderstorm moving in.

I remember there had been one night my grandmother seemed to have an especially mischievous look in her eye.

"How'd you like to hear a real story, boys?" she said. Like a bunch of idiots, we agreed.

She put a finger to her lips. "Not a word to your granpa," she hushed. "If he found out I was tellin' you this he'd tar and feather me for sure."

"This story takes place," my grandmother began, "'bout twenty years ago—after your granpa broke his hip fallin' through some rotten boards in the barn loft.

"Granpa was bedridden after that, and we were up the creek without a paddle, eh. We had a crop to plant, but we only had a couple of field hands—and not very ambitious ones, mind you. I thought I was gonna hafta do all the plantin' myself that season.

"So's a couple of days after Vernon broke his hip, this little man comes up the path here—says he comes from up north lookin' for work. Says he's an expert at takin' care of fields and promises us the best, fattest wheat we'd ever seen in our whole lives if we give him good wages and a place to stay. I didn't want Vernon to hire him. He was askin' for too much pay, and as far as I was concerned, he was just plain too nasty-lookin' to trust.

He had hard, beady little eyes, and his mouth was always cocked into this little grin, like inside he was laughin' at everyone around him. He looked like he'd give as much thought to killin' a man as he would shakin' his hand.

"Well, Vernon said we didn't really have much choice, so we hired him. There was the farmhouse down the road—you know the one, boys. It was where our field hands used to stay.

"But the field-tender wanted nothing to do with the other field hands. He said they'd have to move outta the house if he was goin' to live there, and Vernon and I agreed."

"Why'd you do that?" Jim, my oldest brother asked. "It sounds like he was a real jerk."

"Well, we had a room in our basement for the field hands, and 'sides, the field-tender had a wife. Her name was Maybelle. She was a quiet little soul—almost never opened her mouth. She'd only speak when the field-tender gave her a nod of permission.

"I s'pected right away that he beat that poor woman. She always had scratches and bruises on her face, and she always said she was jus' clumsy. But it was obvious she was lyin'. I used to complain to granpa 'bout it, but he said that the field-tender was doin' excellent work for us and his private affairs weren't none of our business.

He was partly right. The field-tender was doin' an amazin' job. We never had such healthy-lookin' wheat. We had never had stalks so big, tho' I never actually saw the man out in the fields. As a matter of fact, we hardly ever saw him, period. He was a very secretive man.

"And then, boys, I saw one of the strangest things one day. I was out pickin' saskatoons in that little patch 'cross the road, and I noticed the field-tender standin' out in the middle of our field. You could only see him from the waist up 'cause of the wheat. He had taken his shirt off and was hackin' stalks of wheat with this big scythe, like the ones they used in the old days, then he was rubbin' the stalks 'gainst his body.

Even at the distance I was standin' from him, I could see he was quiverin'

with excitement. He had grain dust all over him and it had to itch worse than 'squiter bites, but he was enjoyin' it."

"I could hear him wailin' out, 'I found it, I found it. Beautiful, beautiful grain. Yes, yes, beautiful, wonderful grain, all mine, all mine. I found it, I found it.'"

"Well, I had known the field-tender was a peculiar fellow, but I hadn't thought he was that strange. I don't mind tellin' you boys that I got plenty scared of that man afterseein' that. He reminded me of some of the Cree Manitous I'd hear 'bout. They used to get their power from the earth, eh, and it seemed like the field-tender was doin' one of the ceremonies they used to perform. I snuck back in the house, makin' sure he didn't hear me.

"It weren't much later after that, a couple of days I think, when poor Maybelle came to the house. She'd been beat up. After I got her some tea, she started shakin' and tellin' me how she couldn't take it no more. "He's a devil, he's a devil," she kept tellin' me. Started tellin' me that he was possessed and only kept her 'round so he can have someone to beat on.

'If he even knew I was talkin' to you, he'd kill me,' she cried.

"I didn't know exactly what to do. I tried tellin' her she should leave the bugger, but she just shook her head and said he'd track her down and kill her. She told me the field-tender wouldn't even let her go into Paradise Hill.

'He tells me I have to stay in the house until the crop is harvested,' she cried. 'I can't go anywhere off the farm.'

"All of a sudden, she gets startled by a gust of wind outside, and she wipes her tears away and apologizes for wastin' my time, then scurries back over to her house, sayin' she's got washin' to do. I wish now that I had done more, but to tell you the truth, I was scared of crossin' the field-tender myself. I tried talkin' your granpa into firin' him and lettin' Maybelle stay with us, but he wanted nothing of it—we were havin' our best crop ever, a crop that was gonna get us out of some serious debt. Vernon's always been a sensible man, but he made a mistake back then, and he knows it now."

"Why, what happened?" Jim asked.

Grandma sighed. "We didn't see her no more, and then the field-tender disappeared a couple days before harvest.

"We figured he had taken Maybelle with him, but we found out he had locked her in the root cellar after beatin' her and doin' things to her that I can't even begin to tell you boys. She'd been dead for a couple weeks 'fore we found her. Poor thing had starved to death."

"Wow, did that really happen?" Kyle, my middle brother, said.

"I'll tell you what else happened boys. Why do you think that after twenty years, the house is still empty, eh? Thomas, do you know?" she asked me. "You can hear the sounds at night, can't you?"

I had heard them. I was aware of my brothers eyeing me skeptically. I knew my answer would get laughed at.

"Because the house is haunted?" I said.

"Very good, Thomas," my grandmother smiled.

"Aw, she's just pulling your leg, dummy," Jim said, punching me in the arm.

"Ah, boys, if I'm pullin' your legs, why don't you go look for yourselves some day?" my grandmother said. "She's still in the cellar waiting for someone to come along and let her out."

"Whattya mean, let her out?" I asked.

"I'm old, I'm old," grandma said. "Something like that would take some young blood. Goodness knows we should have done it long ago, but we're too old now."

I hardly slept that night. I kept listening for the sounds she had talked about, and hearing an occasional sad-sounding gust of wind, I would tremble and bury myself under the covers, telling myself that it had only been one of her stories. After hours of restlessness, Kyle shook me awake.

"C'mon, you wanna see the ghost?"

I knew I had to go—or else they'd taunt me ceaselessly. I dressed as quickly as I could.

The three of us sneaked down the stairs and out into the cool, full-moon night. That quarter-mile walk was the longest in my life.

The house loomed ahead of us, black and somber-looking in the moonlight.

Jim was first to climb the steps up the front porch. The doors and windows were boarded up. Jim pulled a couple boards loose from one of the windows and we went in. Kyle had brought a flashlight, and he flicked it on, panning the walls. They were bare and dusty. His light hit the staircase. Under the staircase was the door to the cellar.

"There it is," Kyle whispered.

"I know," Jim snapped back. We stood in the front room, not really sure of what to do next.

"Why don't we go look in the cellar?" I said, seizing the chance to show them up.

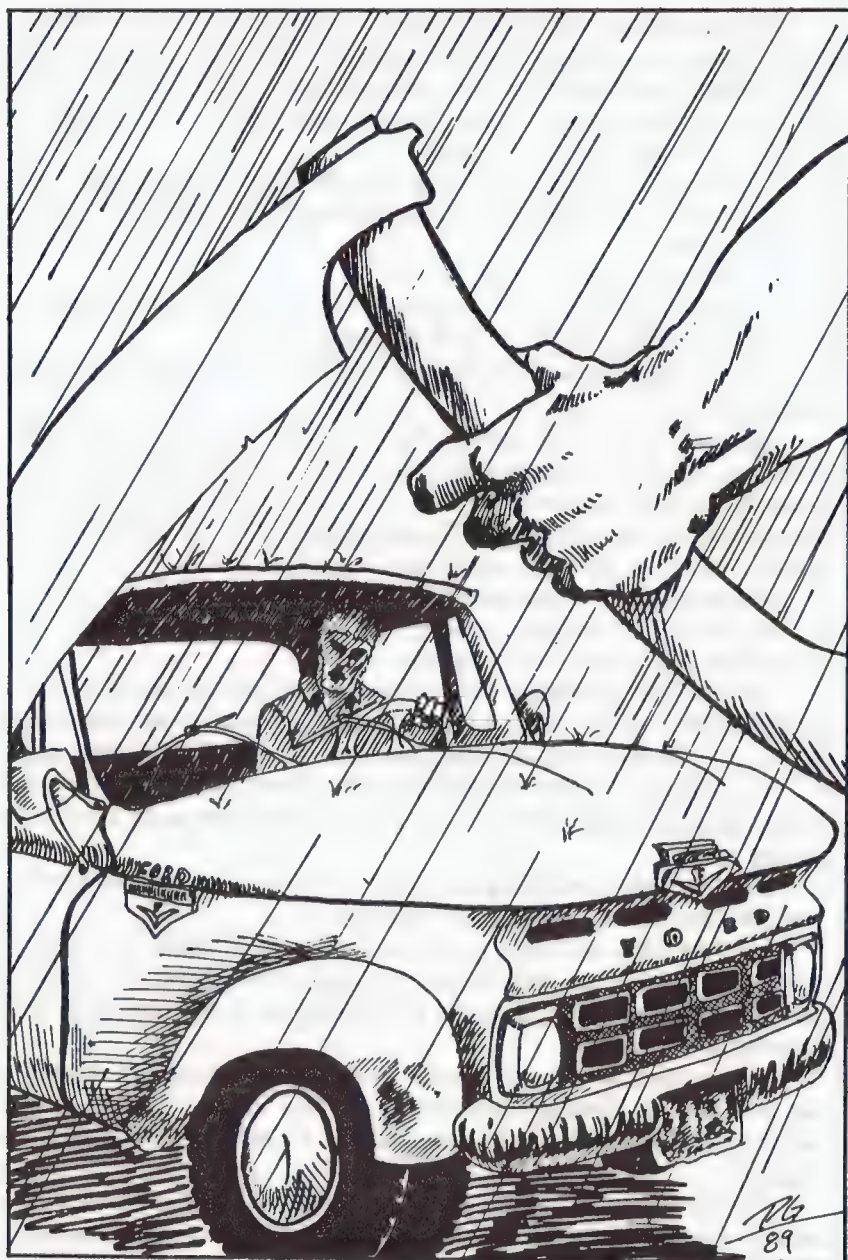
"You do it," Jim hissed.

"Okay, I will," I replied defiantly.

Kyle handed me the flashlight. I felt like a condemned man being handed a noose.

"Don't let her get you," Kyle snickered.

I scowled at him and stepped up to the door, scarcely breathing. I shined the light on the doorknob. I didn't want to touch it.



As I stood at the cellar door, staring at the doorknob, my attention focused on something else. Crying noises, coming up from the cellar, growing louder. Then I heard shuffling sounds and I realized whoever was weeping was also climbing the steps, toward the door, where I was standing. I watched dumbly as the cellar doorknob began to turn.

I turned to run away and saw that Kyle and Jim had disappeared. As I scooted through the window, I remember hearing a voice behind me. A very soft, sad voice.

"Please," it said. "Let me out."

I wouldn't even turn around to face it. As soon as both of my feet were on the porch, I ran, trying to catch up with my brothers.

I turned back to look, after covering a safe distance, terrified that she was coming after us.

Instead, I saw a lone, stooped figure standing at the end of the path, watching. His moonlit shadow seemed to stretch out forever toward us. The figure sent a chill down my back, worse than watching the doorknob turn. It was the way he was just watching us, indifferent to our terror. I whirled around and ran toward my grandparents' house.

That had been the last summer my brothers and I spent on the farm.

But enough reminiscing. It's time to get to the matter at hand. I've brought two five-gallon cans of gasoline with me.

I came to the crossroads at the water tower. I turned onto the cow path and headed directly toward the black clouds coming my way. No one ever bought up my grandparents' farm after they grew too old to farm and moved away.

Yet, I noticed that the fields on either side of the road were stock full of robust, healthy-looking wheat. I had expected the fields to be covered by shaggy weeds.

But somebody was farming the land. I wondered if my grandmother had sold the farm recently—she hadn't mentioned it.

I slowed down as I came to my grandparents' old house, as a flood of memories of happy times raced through my head. I would have loved stopping and looking through the place, but at the moment, I had something more pressing to do.

I drove down to the smaller house at the end of the path. To the west, I noticed forks of lightning illuminating the dark clouds. The storm was probably over Saskatchewan by now. I knew I'd have to get this over with quickly.

I parked well away from the house, and lifted the cans of gasoline from the back of my pickup. The air felt close; thunder rolled across the western sky.

It had been fifteen years since my brothers and I went into the house. Now it seemed like yesterday.

I stood at the foot of the steps leading to the porch. The boards over the windows were falling off. Part of the roof, near the back of the house, had caved in, probably from a heavy snowfall. The front door was broken at the hinges and was hanging slightly ajar, groaning in the rising wind. I climbed the steps and stopped when I heard rustling sounds behind me.

Something was moving around in the wheat. A dog, or a fox, or possibly a gust of wind—that is what my mind was telling me. But my heart was tripping, telling me it was trouble. I stood on the porch steps, gazing out at the golden, innocuous landscape before me. I considered darting back to my truck and driving off, forgetting this whole stupid idea.

But, I remembered the pitiful, pained voice I had heard so many years before. A few minutes in the house, a few splashes of gasoline, and a match was all it would take to release that voice from its bondage.

I went in the house. Through the trails of sunlight poking through the boarded-up windows, I could see clouds of dust kicked up by my steps. I walked to the cellar door, leaving the cans of gasoline in the front room. I opened the door, and gazed into the dimness below, seeing nothing but a startled rat.

I went back to the cans of gasoline as the wind began rattling the loose boards over the windows. I splashed gas on the walls, the ceiling, the floorboards, and the stairs. Emptying the first can, I went to the second and poured gas in the kitchen and bedrooms. Halfway through the second can, I decided to pour the rest down the cellar. A crack of rolling thunder pounded overhead. The storm was very close now. It would be a blessing in disguise. The storm would get blamed for the fire.

Finishing with the second can, I stood in the front room, and pulled a box of wooden matches from my pocket. I took a match from the box and stared at it.

Was this really going to deliver me? Put to rest the years of doubt and restlessness?

In the darkness in the far corner of the house, my eyes detected movement. I discovered that if you get frightened enough, you can actually feel your heart skip a beat.

She, or what was left of her, swayed in front of me. Her flesh had rotted and her bones poked through the joints at her elbows and knees. There wasn't a lot that constituted a face—just a mask of decaying flesh hanging limply on the skull. Black hair hung in thin clumps down to her shoulder. I backed a couple of steps away, fighting the urge to run.

"Let me out," she said. "Please."

She stepped toward me, and I noticed then the mass of maggots quivering in her eyeless sockets.

"Christ!" I cried, backing away.

"Please," she pleaded, coming closer.

"Stay back!" I said, lighting a match and holding it threateningly at her. She kept coming. I threw the match at her and darted out the front door.

I heard a terrific rush of igniting flame as I stopped, panting, at the bottom of the porch steps. I could tell already that the old tinderbox would go up in no time. The wind, which had turned into a gale, whipped the flames into a frenzy. Fire was beginning to jump around upstairs, and I heard a crashing sound from the upstairs floor collapsing.

It was time to leave. The fire was throwing off thick black clouds of smoke. Before too long, it would be noticed in Paradise Hill.

I jogged to the pickup and hopped inside. Fumbling with the keys for a moment, I found the right one and cranked the ignition.

Nothing.

I tried a couple more times. All I got was a sick little click of the solenoid. The battery seemed stone cold dead. Feeling a hot flush of panic, I wondered for a moment what the penalty was in Saskatchewan for arson.

I started to get out of the truck.

Then something on the path stopped me in my tracks.

He was standing in front of the truck, dressed in grubby overalls. He was grinning at me—an unfeeling, feral grin.

In his left hand, he carried a scythe.

I tried starting the truck again, and again there was the pathetic clicking of the solenoid. I locked the doors, and kept trying the ignition. Mercifully, it roared to life.

It began to pour—a total cloudburst, a solid sheet of water that pelted the ground. The house belched a fog of smoke as fire and water struggled against one another. The field-tender stood in the downpour, not seeming to mind the rain. As a matter of fact, his grin widened.

I had a feeling the rain would last a very long time.



DEATH LURE

He spoke to her with a lover's caress,
Reaching through the bloody veil
That flowed warmly from her opened wrists:

"Take my dark and powerful hand
And I will lead you to the land
Where each soul makes its final stand,
And the hour of death is mine to command.
For such is my power as Dark God."

She had worshipped him often in contemplation
And now felt his calling, silky with desire;
For he seduced with revelation:

"I have seen fields green to no end
Spilled with the blood of strong virile men;
Bodies lain waste in a war none may win,
But with you, O! there will be gentleness,
And none will call it sin."

She wonders then about the fewness of her years,
But when she tries to think,
It's his dark call she hears:

He showed her visions while she slept
The graves of infants tenderly kept
By loving mothers who knelt and wept
But over her shoulder came his cold breath
His promise too costly for her to accept.

She struggled then in earnest force,
From the bond of Deep Sleep;
Between life-breath and ghost:

While across a vista of death-addled dreams
Of pain and violence, disease and screams,
Tears in the darkness running like streams,
Loneliness seized her, and it seemed
The greatest terror, knife-edged keen.

Then came the *true* words to his deathly song
Unclothed in deception,
Unbeautiful all along:

"Beware my cruel and wizened claw
Which creeps and crawls from depths of the grave
To steal the breath and snare the soul
Of the life you so foolishly, willingly gave."

by Janadale Sylve-Wickersham

BIRTHRIGHT

by Chris Dolan

Like most of us, I had until recently observed the world from a purely personal vantage. Then, a most singular series of events reformed my attitudes and opinions in a way which I could never have foreseen. I was brought up to believe in a universe ruled by a benign yet distant God, wherein man was the master of the elements, ruling in God's image.

But my first glimmer of the true nature of the universe came not long after my elderly mother became bedridden after breaking her leg in a fall. For the first time, I had free reign to wander unimpeded through the grounds of our spacious abode.

Up until the time of her accident, which occurred one week before my thirtieth birthday, my mother had been fanatically overprotective. Fearful of strange things of which she would not speak, she had limited me to only a few of the gardens and hillocks which abundantly covered our estate. I had for the most part obeyed her because of the intense conviction in her words when she forbade me from certain stretches.

As a child I had made occasional incursions into these forbidden gardens, though there was not much to see. They were densely overgrown with an incredible variety of strange lush vegetation. I had never stayed long or ventured very deep, and the few times I did, I ended up out of my mind with fear. Why I was so afraid I could not tell, but without fail the fear came. I could not face nighttime in the forest.

On my thirtieth birthday then, I set forth from the house my mother and I shared, determined to explore the extensive garden and forest my mother had forbidden but which were my birthright. I no longer felt the unreasonable fear that had plagued my childhood, and so, making sure my mother was comfortable, I packed a backpack and set off to discover the secrets of my birthright.

The forest was very much as I remembered it, though I could tell from a map of the estate that it was not nearly so huge as I had thought. The map detailed the extent of the forest and a small river which ran through it. I decided I would make for a waterfall marked on the map which had a relatively central location in the garden.

I suppose I am confusing you, interchangeably using forest and garden, but I am not myself sure which is more correct. From size and appearance at a distance, one would assume the grounds must be a forest, and yet none of the vegetation is familiar—from the overgrown red-tinged grass covering the forest floor, to giant gnarled trees, which could be oaks except for the huge purple blossoms crowding the upper branches.

The deeper I traveled, the stranger the vegetation became. At last, some

time in the afternoon, I came upon the waterway I had assumed to be a river and following it, I came upon the waterfall.

In days past, it may have been a radiant shower, crashing from its origin many yards above to the jagged rocks below, but now it had slowed to a mere rivulet running down the vertical cliff to a stagnant pond below. My disappointment evaporated when I realized that the waterfall before had hidden something which now lay revealed.

A wooden door was embedded in the hillside, about halfway up the cliff. Carefully watching my footing on the loose rocks, I made my way up to the doorway. I was elated. I had set off to explore the unknown, but had never really expected to find anything.

The door had no obvious knob. I pushed, pulled, slammed, kicked, and even yelled at it, but nothing gave. I had turned to leave with the intention of returning the next day with a crowbar when the door then opened of its own accord, creaking ominously on its ancient hinges, and swinging inward into darkness. A damp musty chill emanated from the yawning orifice, rekindling my childhood fears. Then, regaining my composure, I lit a cigarette and entered.

When my eyes had adjusted, I made out the shape of a candle. Lighting it, I caught my first glimpse of the room: cobwebbed shelves cluttered with dusty books, a desk, a table, and a small chimney which seemed to have been naturally formed by rock. Except for the damp stone walls, the room could have been anyone's study.

A huge leatherbound volume lay open on the desk. I blew off the layer of dust and began to page through the text. There were many diary-like entries, and quite a few blank pages as well, as if further entries were anticipated at some future time. From the dates and familiarity of the handwriting, I concluded this cave-like room to have been my father's secret retreat, though why he would have found secrecy and isolation desirable or necessary I could not fathom. Having never known my father, who had died before my birth, I was elated at the prospect of learning more about him.

It soon became obvious, however, that the volume was more than a diary. The majority of entries predated my father, and nearly all were written in a strange symbol language. Those entries I could make out hinted of spiritual realities which encroached on and superseded our own. Hungry for increased knowledge, I began to make daily pilgrimages to the hidden study, which I began to call my own.

I started the work of cross-reference research, slowly building up a key of symbols with which to translate the book. I felt that the key to my destiny lay locked within the ancient volume.

I all but neglected my beloved mother. This distressed me tremendously,

but I felt that my research was vital. I engaged a live-in nurse from the local village to care for my mother's needs, drawing as always from the extensive family account my father had set up before his death. My mother was somewhat suspicious, but I assured her I had the best intentions, and was involved in an interesting new pursuit. I did not wish to upset her with the true facts of my newfound interest.

After weeks of research, I began to translate the book into comprehensible form. I found that the first half was a veritable bible of occult spiritual doctrine. The later diary-like entries were improvements and additions which were the result of personal spiritual experimentation by later owners of the book. My translation of the first few pages of the symbol writing indicated that only by successfully exercising the mental processes described in one chapter could one hope to translate the next. It was a sort of security feature, to ensure that an initiate had the proper background for progressing to advanced material.

Although I had had no previous contact with spiritual or occult systems, I practiced the exercises described in my newfound bible and found that they worked marvelously. Those exercises the book claimed required months of practice I picked up in weeks. Spending long hours in meditation, I learned to visualize myself as a point of light beyond my eyelids, and then as a spiritual body.

I flew fearlessly in my dreams, becoming versed in the habit of dream control. I could even at will extinguish or ignite a candle from a distance. I began to sleep in my forest hideaway, bringing in bedding from the house.

My dreams were vistas upon vistas of self-discovery. Unafraid of anything they might offer, I had read about halfway through the spiritual tutorial, at what was described as a threshold point. To excel to the next level of development, I was required to undertake an all-encompassing search of the unconscious, so that no unknown aspect could remain to impede my progress. I would then be free to transcend my body and explore the higher planes of reality. The long-sought fruits of my research were within reach; only the final soul journey remained.

When the night arrived, I felt as though I were on the verge of enlightenment. I would let nothing stand in my way. I settled into the lotus position amidst a chalk pentagram, lighted incense burners at each of the five points.

Breathing deeply, I closed my eyes, pushing all extraneous thoughts from my mind. Leaving my body, I rose through the now partially transparent cave into the night air, where I floated in blackness, waiting for the images I knew would come.

And they did come, crystalline, floating. I assimilated each, swelling with spiritual energy. I think I saw things exactly as they really are. I was the universe, for a moment, and then darkness.

I flew like a bird over the barely visible image of the nighttime forest, which gained solidity as I fell into it. The forest was alive with darting lights, shifting images and demonic sentience. I saw huge black shadows among the trees, and knew they had been waiting for me.

I landed hard on the ground and sprinted through the forest more fearful than I had ever been, even as a child. I glanced behind me and saw the shadows gaining. Fairie lights danced crazily across my vision, lighting the forest with their rainbow glow. I was running faster than ever I thought possible and still the shadows gained, for such is the nature of dreams.

Branches scraped at my face, and one tree seemed to extend a root to trip me. I fell headlong into a roll, somersaulted, and leapt upright again, still running. As I made for a clearing in the trees, I felt the ice cold breath of the beings which pursued me. I screamed as I broke into the clearing. Looking up, I saw the tower of a huge Gothic edifice against the background of stars above. There was a momentary tinge of recognition and then I crashed against the door, which burst inward in a shower of boards and splinters.

As I struggled to my feet, I saw that the shadows had not followed me. Instead, they had formed a circle around the ancient house. Their amorphous humanoid forms danced to the piping of insect hordes against the background of what seemed to be a forest of decorated Christmas trees.

I brushed myself off and observed the room about me. It was not a room really, but a huge entrance hall. Walls stretched in either direction to the vaulted ceiling above. In front of me, a stairway led upward to succeeding balconies and doorways, each more massive than the last. Each door was a huge ebony slate, inlaid with symbols and images, knobbed with golden rings. For me, they held within all the power and mystery the universe could contain. This was the paramount moment of my life.

I had ascended the stairs and now stood looking up at the ebony doors. I pushed both of the panels. They swung silently inward. The chamber that lay within was not like any which could have been foreseen from the outside of the structure. All I could see, as I entered the chamber, were stars. I was drawn forward into the void.

There was no visible floor, only stars, but I could feel solidity beneath my feet. A pentagram at least 45 meters in diameter seemed to float in the blackness of the imaginary floor. At the point furthest from me, a lone figure sat enthroned on a dais of multicolored crystal.

I stopped when I reached the center of the pentagram. The figure, head propped by his hand, glared at me. He was huge, imposing, with piercing black eyes. When our gazes met, his image became unreal, the black eyes shifting from glowering features to empty sockets set in a smiling skull. I have no idea how long I stood there under his hypnotic gaze, for I had no impression of time.

Insect piping again filled the air, and the stars around me blinked. I realized that the shadows, which had pursued me earlier, were here too, cavorting and orbiting around me amongst the stars. They would not, it seemed, enter the pentagram.

As the piping grew, the figure finally spoke. His words came from everywhere at once, in a harsh resonating tone.

"We've been waiting for you for a long time." The piping rose to a crescendo.

"Son."

A scream reached my ears as if from a distance. I realized that it was emanating from my own throat. I found myself screaming, shaking, in my cave beneath the extinct waterfall. Fleeing down the hillside, oblivious to any pain I might incur in flight, I ran through the forest, now devoid of fairie lights, yet glowing faintly in the moonlight. I didn't stop running until the sun rose and I could see my home, and safety, in the distance.

Reaching the house, I ran directly to my mother's upstairs room.

"Tell me the truth about my father!" I screamed.

She gave me a shrewd look. "You've been in the forest."

I saw my reflection in the mirror above the dresser. I was bedraggled beyond belief, my face cut, my clothing shredded and my entire person stained with mud.

"Obviously I've been in the forest," I snapped. "And I have discovered things there that you are very well aware of. Things which have made my father's identity and the history of my ancestors very important to me!"

She appeared more old and frail than ever before. I could see the weight of years and long hidden secrets in the wrinkles of her face. I felt ashamed at betraying her trust, but it was far too late.

"Very well," she said. "You shall know all of it, though you will wish you had never asked."

It was too late for that too.

"I had already given my marriage vow when I first discovered my husband's strange obsessions. At first they did not seem too bizarre. Even I began to take a partial interest, seeing them as a natural extension of the religious process. 'Occult Spiritualism' was a popular interest at the time, but Reginald had a distinct advantage over the rabble. He had been trained by a true yogi, his great uncle Ceazar Ramihad III. When Ceazar died, Reginald inherited from him a copy of an ancient pre-Druid Celtic spirit manual, which he quickly translated and began to study.

"About that same time, he began making long pilgrimages into the forest, which at that time came right up to the house. He would leave for days

at a time and return youthful, energetic and happy, claiming to have 'found God' in the forest. While he was gone, I began my own study of the text, using his notes as guidelines. I was unable to do even the simplest visualization exercises, and gave up. But I was still interested in understanding what he found so special about his studies.

"One day I followed him into the forest, to a waterfall deep in the center of the woods. He removed his clothing and showered there. As he stood beneath the fall, amidst the spray and pounding cascade, he began to chant in deep reverberating tones.

"The entire forest began to vibrate. Every tree, rock and bush trembled to the spoken syllables. Soon, even the ground began to shake. Clouds appeared and swept across the sky. The wind began to howl, the very air seemed almost to glow, alive with shimmering, darting lights.

"Then an ear-shattering roar ripped the air and the very fabric of reality seemed to pull apart, exposing the emptiness beyond. These ruptures gave birth to huge black devils direct from the nether pits of hell.

"I fled then, back to the house, but when he came home, he knew I had seen his abominations. He beat me senseless, gathered the book and some notes, and left for the forest. When he returned that night, he had murder in his eyes. He went to his study on the second floor. I barricaded him inside."

I interrupted. "A study? On the second floor?"

"We had a different house then. I...I burned it." She shuddered as she said it.

A whining noise filled my ears. I could hear faint piping, growing.

"You killed him?"

She was crying now. "What could I do? What choice did I have? He would have killed me! He was an abomination to both man and God."

I felt she was right then. That she had done the right thing. But his ghost still existed for me, and I must destroy it. I ran from the room.

"Wait!" she screamed, but before I had reached the front door, the house had—changed.

The piping had grown to a blare; there was only one way to stop it. I stood at the foot of the stairs in the ancient entry hall. Redemption lay above. My eyes scanned the room. Two medieval battle axes hung crossed above the hearth. I forced the top one from its rusted brackets. Brandishing my weapon, I ran the steps three at a time and used the force of my ascent to deliver a blow to the single ebony door which impeded me. It burst inward.

There he was, the skeletal king on his diamond throne. My father's face smiled, and then metamorphosed into a laughing skull which spit flaming oil, scalding my face.

I swung the axe. The insane piping and the pounding of my heart faded,



replaced by a calm sense of satisfaction. I had done it, I had destroyed him and would never follow in his demonic footsteps.

The room returned to its true state and I was in my own house again. Then I looked down and the whining piping came rushing back. I stared at the body of my dead mother, axe imbedded in her forehead, blood running in rivers over her disbelieving eyes. Something snapped inside my head.

The room exploded outwards into space. I was again before my father's crystal dais in the darkness of eternal night. I took His hand and followed Him as He showed me the extent of the domain over which our family held precedence. It was He who first brought me to my present revelation, and thus demonstrated it to be true.

There will always be servants of the darker gods, as there are servants of the light. I am just such a servant, have always been, and always will be. In the end, it's all the same. Darkness or light, I have no choice. I can only be who I am.

The river is running and I am the one beneath the waterfall. I can still hear the piping, but I have joined in the dance of the demon shadows, among the will o' th' wisps in this forest, my home.



JUDGMENT DAY

Broken bodies, dead and burned;
Evil minds boiled and churned.
The time has come, the time did pass;
The seventh seal was broke at last.

The old is dead, the new is born;
All those bodies ripped and torn.
The demons fought, the angels tore;
God, who will ever win this war?

It's all over, it's all done;
Both fought hard, but evil won.
Judgment day, the Bible said;
No one knew; all were dead.

by Andy Crawford

CHECKOUT

by Jon Burns

He was a pressure cooker ready to explode. Over the comline:

"We need a cleanup in front of the milk box, right away."

"Can I see a bagger on quick-check, please?"

The demanding voices echoed over the din of peak hour at Smith's Market. Eddie was being pulled in every direction. The stress was unbearable.

"I don't know how much more I can take," he thought.

"Always moving, always running, somewhere, for someone who really doesn't care. I know, I know, as long as I get my paycheck, it's okay. But is it worth it? I'm going crazy. I get enough of this shit all day at school. So much pressure. Too much pressure. These assholes screaming at me all night, until I'm so burned out that I'll be too exhausted to do any homework when I get home. Dammit! Fuck this place!"

"Okay, wait a minute. You can handle it, Eddie my boy. You've been doing it for the last five months, there's no reason to crack now. Just take a deep breath, calm down and do your job."

"Okay...but I swear to Satan if I have to carry out another bitch's groceries with some screaming little bastard kid in the cart, I'm gonna snap!"

And as Eddie made his curse, he slammed his fist against a checkstand edge and drew blood, quite unexpectedly. Eddie hadn't ever seen that much blood flow from his own hand, and he felt faint at the sight of it.

"Carry out on Checkstand 9! Ready to go!"

Suddenly—silence—as if Eddie's world had stopped, but all else just went on. The pounding in his head from all the chaos was replaced by a total silence and the slow steady pounding of his own heart, reverberating like a bass drum. He paused and looked around. There was not another bagger to be seen. He was alone. The only one for the carry-out. A cold chill crept up his spine.

"Eddie! Checkstand 9 please!"

The repeated call only half-jarred him out of his trance. All his attention was focused on that next customer (as it should be, of course, yes, the manager would certainly be happy if he could see him now...)

"COOKIES, MOMMY! COOKIES, MOMMY! I WANT COOKIES!"

The kid was screaming bloody blue murder for a box of cookies, sounding like the devil calling Damien and every other demon from hell. And the only sound Eddie could hear was the intense, deep throbbing of his heart and the shrill satanic scream of little Jason (wasn't that what his mother called him?)

"We're parked on the left," the mother said, giving the boy a box of cookies. But Eddie didn't hear. He simply took the cart and somehow knew to push it to the left. Jason had his cookies, but his reign of terror went on.

Eddie, walking in a trance, became aware of a cool, slimy, gritty mass sliding from the top of his hands down between his fingers. He glanced down and saw Jason taking saliva-soaked cookies out of his mouth and smearing the sludge all over Eddie's white-knuckled hands.

"Jason, you stop that right now," Mommy exclaimed, and she snatched the box out of his hands.

The steam in Eddie's pressure cooker was building up, rising to the bursting point.

The trunk of the car opened up, and Eddie methodically placed the grocery bags in it. The mother searched for something inside the car, and as Eddie turned his back to the little satan, he felt a splat behind his right ear. Cold slime dripped from his ear down the back of his neck. He slowly wiped the sludge off with his stiff fingers, turned to the giggling child, and smashed the sludge into the boy's face. Jason released the most bone-rattling, nerve-shattering scream yet and Eddie was sure it was the voice of Satan himself. The pressure peaked.

"Jason! Shut up right now!" his mother shouted from within the car. And, miraculously, Jason did. But it wasn't an instant silence, more of a fading-away quiet.

"How strange," she thought. "I wonder . . ."

She quickly leaped from the car, fear caught in her throat. Behind the open trunk was her empty shopping cart. Jason was gone, Eddie was gone.

"Oh my God!" she gasped. Looking across the parking lot, she saw Eddie already two-thirds of the way to the side of the road, with Jason screaming and thrashing tucked under his arm. She ran. But she knew it was too late. She watched as Eddie reached the side of the road, waited a split second for the next car to pass, and marched into oncoming traffic.

She screamed as he held the child up to the blue sky in ritualistic exaltation and sacrifice.

She watched as Eddie jumped in front of a speeding station wagon and was plowed through in an instant. She heard bones crunch as an ocean of blood stained the black asphalt which served as death bed to both bagger and child.

Shock and horror swept over her as she collapsed on the roadside, screaming and weeping in mourning for the death of her son.

He was a pressure cooker ready to explode. Over the comline:

"Need price-check on number five, please!"

"Bagger on Express Checkout, if you're not too busy!"

The demanding voices echoed over the din of peak hour at Fruitdale Market. Eddie was being pulled in every direction. The stress was unbearable...



VAMPIRES IN LOVE

Two Book Reviews by David M. Van Becker

Blood Thirst by L. A. Freed. Windsor-Pinnacle Books, 1989.

Shattered Glass by Elaine Bergstrom. Berkley-Jove Books, 1989.

Both these recent novels feature the new breed of fictional vampires: always adapted to human society, often the good guys, almost regular folks like you and me, even though they drink blood for a living. While keeping quite a bit of traditional bloody vampire action, both books are also romances, with young, naive heroines under the dark influence of a mysterious and powerful male.

Vampire romance is nothing new, of course. Remember TV's *Dark Shadows*, and Yarbrow's charming St. Germain? But in each of these novels, well before the endings, the heroine has joined her lover as a vampire, and they will live happily ever, ever after.

Both the young heroines have trouble accepting the idea of vampire life, and even more trouble living it. They both have trouble with killing, a common problem of the new vampires. But here the resemblances end.

In Blood Thirst, Angela is a young reporter working on a story in South Carolina when she is violently transformed, and has to come to terms with her new nightmare existence. She is helped in her vampire initiation by old Elijah, a kindly Uncle Remus vampire, who speaks Gullah, the Black English dialect of the southeastern coast. And Angela is worried about the master vampire of the area, who seems determined to make a hell of her undead life—the familiar theme of good vamp versus bad vamp.

Blood Thirst has a lot of interesting local color, but the story slows down in too much detail (however amusing) of how vampires adapt to everyday life. With their specially built RV's, vampire conventions, tricks of disguise, household arrangements, it's practically a manual of vampire survival. Of course in the end, Angela does hear the 200-year-old story of why she was made a vampire, and there's a somewhat violent and sexy climax.

The heroine of Shattered Glass is even more vulnerable. Helen, a 19-year-old talented art student confined to a wheelchair, is fascinated when a mysterious and aristocratic European moves in next door. Stephen is an artist working in stained glass, who comes to renovate the Gothic windows of the parish church in suburban Cleveland.

At once they are involved in a series of bizarre murders, for Helen's uncle is the investigating detective, and it looks like Stephen's brother is the killer. Here, both brothers are vampires—another version of the good vamp versus the bad vamp, perhaps first seen in George R.R. Martin's Fevre Dream.

There's a good deal of bloody vampire action in Shattered Glass, but it also slows a bit, not in homey detail or local color but in the fictional history of the vampire species and the family lore behind the story. While it may be interesting that Bergstrom's vampires made all the stained glass windows of the great medieval cathedrals, we really don't need all that family history. And despite the explanation, the motivation of the evil brother is unconvincing. In the end, as in most mysteries and Gothics, we find that everybody is related in some way, and that after a suspenseful, bloody climax, the lovers will be together for a long long time, cured of all their ills.

These books are pretty good reads, with enough action and complexity to hold our interest. Blood Thirst has clever details, like old Elijah leaving the story to go on a hostage rescue mission for the CIA. Shattered Glass successfully details how vampires work and relate to human culture.

But they both disappoint the reader by not exploring further the psychic possibilities of the modern vampire, a remarkable creature in many of its versions. In both novels, vampires perceive over long distances, read human minds, hypnotise, erase memory, and perform other mental feats. But these remain mechanical skills, unrelated to any expanded view of reality we might expect from gifted beings who live a thousand years, master great knowledge, and possibly control their own destinies—all beyond human imagining. These stories are good beginnings, but they don't stretch the reader's imagination far enough.

There's a built-in problem with vampires in love, just as there's a problem with vampires being the heroes or good guys. Love and heroism have a basic conflict with the vampire's predatory nature: to drink human blood, usually without the real consent of the owner. Unless a vampire novel somehow faces up to this issue, the resulting story will be a bit strained. Of course we can imagine vampires having sex in all their (per)versions, and even loving each other, I guess as an instinctive response. But when they get romantic in the old-fashioned Romeo and Juliet way, I wonder if it's believable in the vampire context.

The best modern vampire stories, such as Rice's Interview With The Vampire and Charnas' The Vampire Tapestry, deal directly with the moral problems of love, blood, killing and all their consequences. Like most of the rest, Blood Thirst and Shattered Glass do not, and on that level they are vaguely unsatisfying.



